

# THE ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE CONTROVERSY IN THE COLONIAL PUNJAB

Darshan S. Tatla

Fellow, Department of Punjab Historical Studies, Punjabi University

## Introduction

The paper seeks to highlight and understand the origin of language controversy in the colonial Punjab. During the 1880s as the British authorities formalised several policies for the instruction of western style education in Punjab, this event led to a vigorous debate among the Punjab elite. The immediate issue that the administration wanted to settle was about an appropriate language of literacy to be adopted by government schools. Although the choice was clear in most areas of Punjab where Panjabi was the common language of ordinary people. However, instead of choosing the shared spoken language Panjabi which most Punjabis used for daily communication, its elite were divided along religious traditions of the subcontinent. This meant Panjabi speaking Hindus argued to be taught in Hindi while Muslims contended Urdu as the most appropriate language of literacy. Only groups representing the numerically smallest Sikh community were left to support the claim of Panjabi not so much for its educational and linguistic merits or worth but more so by rather insulting and contemptuous attitude of Hindus and Muslims towards Panjabi –an attitude which they had no reason to believe among their fellow Punjabis until this issue brought out such a blatant prejudice among several Hindus and Muslim groups and organisations.

As such, Punjab as a multi-ethnic society of the late nineteenth century provides an excellent case to examine Anderson's influential hypothesis regarding the emergence of linguistic identity and especially the importance of script as part of native nationalism.<sup>1</sup> He further sees the colonial rule endangering such modernity through the introduction of a Western language for natives while asking them to choose one or more of native languages for school education. Briefly, Anderson assumes that only on the introduction of written instruction in formal education, a particular language becomes a defining characteristic of newly educated elite. He has underlined the role of print media and formal education as crucial factors in understanding the emergence of ethnic consciousness and identity. He provides a wide range of case studies in colonial setting. Hence, this is particularly relevant hypothesis to test in the case of Punjab where formal education was introduced by colonial administration. As a reaction, its traditional elite started articulating group solidarity by appropriating

differentiating cultural markers. Thus from a common language of a region, social groups could differentiate themselves through adopting a particular script for the same language or opt for another language altogether as vehicle for literacy. In this way, a particular script along with some other linguistic characteristics could become new icons of group solidarity and identity. In general, as a predominantly oral tradition succumbed to a written media, claims over languages became contested. For a commonly shared language, contest was usually over choice of scripts, the colonial contact also started a process of abandoning the shared and 'enchanted' world of folklore and common beliefs in favour of high religious tradition.

Punjab seems to provide an ideal case of testing theories of linguistics affiliation and identity. First, the paper offers a brief history of western education in the colonial Punjab and how the government undertook educational reforms for which a Commission was constituted to deliberate various issues. The evidence to this Commission on the issue of appropriate language to be taught in schools constitutes the main subject for this paper.

### **Western Education in Punjab: A Brief Account**

Punjab came under the British rule in 1849. Until then and indeed for the next twenty years, an indigenous system of education prevailed. This consisted of largely instruction in religious scriptures, music and indigenous medicine taught through seminaries run by various religious sects, sadhus and other pious men. Such philanthropic institutions owed their existence due to the patronage of princes and aristocrats. During the Sikh rule, considerable patronage was available for religious institutions due to the benevolence of its ruler, Ranjit Singh.<sup>2</sup> Several other Sikh chiefs had also endowed some institutions and patronised various artists, painters, granthis, pujaris, Sufis and other learned men.

In 1849 the British rule replaced the Sikh kingdom and Punjab witnessed radical changes in terms of people's property rights, and then the crisis of 1857 meant the British government formally ruled India. In the Punjab, administration first grappled with land settlement, and then it turned its attention to the educational system. For this purpose, a Commission was appointed by the government of India in 1882. Headed by Lord Hunter, it was to report from various provinces on the current state of education and how best to proceed further. By then formal education was gradually emerging in various provinces, with Bengal having advanced much ahead of others. However, Punjab was comparatively late in establishing formal education, mainly due to its late entry into the Indian empire. The capital of the province, Lahore, opened its first western style school in 1867.

Until 1880s, religious schools or traditional seminaries as these were called, were largely concerned with instruction in theology and religious scriptures<sup>3</sup>. The colonial rule initiated a new style of education, a formal school theoretically open to all young children of certain age. It was eventually to replace and undermine the seminary schools. Since it was a new experiment, British administrators were apprehensive about its impact and wanted to involve and gauge the public opinion and reaction. While administrators had various expectations and assumptions regarding its impact on indigenous population, views ranged from turning literate Indian into an 'Anglicised Englishman' to merely expanding the pool of 'Babus or clerks' for the lowest stratum of administration. By the 1880s almost every province had a dose of formal western education; it was felt necessary to review this experiment.

### **Hunter Commission: The Language Question in Punjab**

Accordingly a Commission was instituted for a comprehensive review. The Commission's remit was very wide; to investigate the extent of non-formal education, financing of primary, secondary and higher education, its curriculum and better forms of administration, examination provisions and so on. The Commission had an all-India scope and was aimed to draw some general conclusions, although it produced reports for various provinces, its remit was also to see how various provinces had a semblance of common educational pattern. The Commission became known as Hunter Commission as the Commission was chaired by Lord W. W. Hunter.

The Commission members for Punjab were Lord W. W. Hunter who was assisted by Rev. W. R. Blackett, Mr. C. Pearson, Haji Ghulam Hassan and Mr. K. Deighton.<sup>4</sup> The Commission started its sittings in Lahore from the beginning of 1882 and for the next nine months it took evidence from experts calling on educational administrators, local organisations and general public to present their views and memoranda. The Commission had drafted a set of nearly seventy questions ranging in its scope seeking wide opinions about primary, secondary to higher education, covering most aspects of educational provision, its administration, and quality of text books, system of government grants, efficiency of state run schools, teachers' pay and conditions. The Commission made a wide appeal to respond to these questions.

Within this questionnaire, the Commission also enquired public view 'on the use of suitable vernaculars' in government schools. This was question number eleven, it seemed innocent enough, couched in terms of administrative efficiency, but this was one question that elicited

vigorous and heated response from many individuals and organisations, leading to much polarised views on the issue. The question was quite plain as it read;

*Is the vernacular recognised and taught in the schools of your province the dialect of the people and if not, are the schools on that account less useful and popular?*

The response to this question forms a substantial portion of the Commission's proceedings. Social organisations of three communities of Punjab almost took directly opposite stands on the issue. This large evidence relating to the vernacular question can be conveniently divided into two main headings; [a] from individuals and [b] submission from organisations. Among the first, there is interesting contrast of evidence presented on this issue by English administrators and the indigenous elite discussed below. First we need to have a brief look at the linguistic map of the province in the late nineteenth century.

### **Linguistic Geography of Punjab**

The geography of Punjab enclosed a complex linguistic map, within its sheer size containing diverse population, many groups of people and languages. Its total area was 143,806 square miles, with total population of 22,712,120 distributed among 52,870 villages or townships. The religious geography of Punjab according to 1881 census was as follows;

**Table: 1: Ethnic composition of Punjab in 1861**

Religious Group	Numbers	Percentage
Mohammedans	10,525,150	55.65
Hindus	7,130,528	37.67
Sikhs	1,121,004	5.942
Buddhists and Jains	38,690	0.2
Christians	33,420	0.2
Others	1,645	0.001
Total	18,865,037	100

On the eastern side, Delhi, Gurgaon, Karnal Rohtak -mainly Hindi speaking areas, on the northern side, hilly areas' language varied from Pahari to Kashmiri. Some western areas had Pushtu as mother tongue. In the central spread of main districts of Punjab, Panjabi was the main language with several dialects, well-known among these dialects was Multani in the east and Lehnda in central areas.

### **Disputing the Language? A War by Petitions**

The evidence presented to the Commission by various organisations on the issue of language marks a turning point in the 'communal divide' in the province from the 1880s. The argument can be extended that it geared the province towards events of 1947 when the province was tragically partitioned. An embryonic volcano can be seen to gather in its menacing shape in the kind of arguments presented to the Hunter Commission. The proceedings of Commission were published and this paper draws on these submissions. As such these proceedings throw much light on how the new system of education became tied to ethno-religious divide in the province.

Organisational response to Hunter Commission shows a concerted effort by community organisations to canvass a large number of people to submit evidence and arguments in favour of their respective stands. The evidence presented to the Commission can be conveniently divided into two major categories. First, testimonies of individuals who appeared before the Commission, among them were members of the indigenous elite, princes and aristocrats; teachers and educationists; government officers including some clerks from translation departments, religious representatives and a number of English administrators and Christian missionaries. Written petitions were also sent by many individuals corroborating their personal testimony before the Commission. Second, representations came from various community organisations, the latter were essentially conscious mobilisation undertaken through the impetus of certain urban leaders. As the Commission went to work it was clear that on the language question, it had opened a very emotional and highly volatile subject.

The Commission also saw a major mobilisation by various communities to impress the Commission regarding the language issue. As expected, Hindu organisations were the most articulate and numerous in rallying to the cause of Hindi. This was followed by small number of Sikh and Muslim organisations who propagated Panjabi and Urdu respectively. Mobilisation of Lahore based organisations was naturally greater than from any other city. As is well known Lahore was a predominantly a city of Arya Samaj domination with many leading Hindus

holding trades and properties far excess than their numbers warranted.

### **[A] The Hindi Lobby**

The Arya Samajis of Lahore expectedly sent a thick memo putting many arguments for education reforms but its advocacy for Hindi and Sanskrit was top of this list [p.471]. The petition was signed by Sam Dass, president, Dwarka Dass as its secretary and on the question of language, its memorandum argued,

The vernacular recognised and taught in the schools of the Punjab is not the dialect of the people. It is a foreign language, which is spoken neither by Mohammedans nor by Hindus. The vernacular of the people is Hindi beyond Sutlej, and a dialect of Hindi on the Punjab side of the river, whereas the language taught in the schools is Urdu..... [p.471]

The arguments of Punjab Brahmo Samaj were no less stringent. In its lengthy petition signed by N. Chandra Das of 6 July 1882, the Samaj elaborated its advocacy of Hindi; it took exception to the use of Urdu in primary schools, arguing Hindi *bhasha* should replace it. But it also demolished the claim of Punjabis as an independent language before listing three distinct reasons why Hindi language is superior to Urdu;

‘Why we prefer Hindi to Panjabi is that in the first place, the latter is only a dialect of the former; secondly, Hindi being almost identical with easy Urdu, the change will require will chiefly in the characters.... The greatest advantage of the Deva Nagiri characters is that they can be learnt in such a short time that their use will not only save a great amount of expenditure on primary education...’ [p.492]

Conceding that ‘Gurmukhi characters possess the same characteristics and advantages as the Deva Nagiri characters’, but it argued, ‘as the use of the former is confined to this province only, and here also to a small section of the people, while that of the latter is universal throughout the country, and as Hindi possesses a rich vernacular literature which can be availed of if instruction be given through the Deva Nagiri characters, we recommend the use of Deva Nagiri characters in educational books in preference to the Gurmukhi characters also’.

Then petitions came various organisations from districts, usually signed by a leading person with his supporters. Thus, inhabitants of Jhang and Maghiana in their petition to Hunter Commission [p532-3] put forward long arguments against the use of Urdu in education. The

petition was signed by 1,584 inhabitants of Jhang and Maghiana, with identical memorial received from 1,541 residents of Rewari in Gurgaon district, 624 residents of Domeli, Fort Rohtas, and Malot in Jhelum district, 9,000 residents of Amritsar, 2,033 residents of Ludhiana, 641 residents of Hoshiarpur, 583 of Batala, 1,265 of Wazirabad and Sodra, 382 from Jalanadhar, 850 of Sirsa, 4,825 residents of Delhi, 3,287 Rohtak, 900 of Vairawal, Fatehabad, Jullundur and Gondwal, 800 of Dera Ghazni Khan, 500 of Jhelum. Having disposed of Urdu's claim, it asked that Persian and Urdu should be substituted by the vernacular of the province. It asked in a dramatic way, 'the question which naturally arises out of this is: what is the vernacular of the Punjab?' It then tried to answer this as:

...The language of Punjab is no doubt called Panjabi, but properly speaking, Panjabi is not the name of any one dialect spoken in any one part of the province but collectively of all the different dialects spoken in parts of it. This, of course shows, that Panjabi is not any one language which may be considered to be vernacular of the province, but it must be remembered that the different dialects of Punjab are not far removed each other and that they have a common parent language which is called Hindi.

The memorandum further claimed that as 'a proof of this it may be stated that Hindi is understood more or less by all classes of the people throughout the province'. By the term Hindi, we do not mean that high-flown Hindi which is written and understood by literary men only, but we mean simple Hindi -the standard Hindi -which is neither the dialect of any particular locality, nor the diction of any Indian Johnson.... The petition concluded as:

'Such are the incontestable facts in proof of Hindi being the national language of the Punjab!

Not content with such distortion of linguistic heritage of Punjab, the Hindi lobbyist continued in the same vein for several more pages. It contended that 'the dialects of the Punjab sound different from standard Hindi simply because of difference in pronunciation and in the inflections -the very reason which has made the dialects of the North Western provinces, though, all rightly included under the name Hindi appear different from one another.' It asked then a rhetorical question and answered the same as follows: 'What is called the Panjabi or Gurmukhi literature is nothing but a collection of Hindi books in the Gurmukhi characters. Surely, if Panjabi or Gurmukhi had been a language distinct from Hindi, its literature would not have consisted chiefly of a number of Hindi books in the Gurmukhi alphabet.....'

For the foregoing reasons, the memorandum argued that 'it cannot but be clear that the Punjab, like the North Western Provinces, has one common literary or standard language, of which the different dialects are mere local varieties, and that language is Hindi. It is through Hindi, therefore, that instruction should be given to the masses who, whether Hindu or Mohammedans understand that and no other language. The next question which has to be considered is the question of alphabet. The question here lies between the Deva Nagiri and the Gurmukhi characters. The sole claim of Gurmukhi is that it is the alphabet of the Sikhs, and that among the Hindus also it is known to some extent. But it cannot be said that Gurmukhi is more largely known than the Deva Nagiri in the Punjab. Firstly, Gurmukhi, after all, is only a modification of Deva Nagiri.' But script of Gurmukhi could not be accepted, according to Hindi lobbyist as;

'Unfortunately, it is a modification for the worse, for it is neither so legible nor as complete as Deva Nagiri'. [p.535]

Among other disadvantages of Panjabi language were, it argued that, 'Gurmukhi being confined to only to the Punjab, a Panjabi student who has been taught through the medium of that alphabet would only find by far the largest portion of Hindi literature, which, in the north western provinces and Oudh, Behar, & co., is written in Deva Nagiri characters, a sealed book to him'. Thirdly, it argued that, 'a boy who would prosecute his studies in a high school or college would have to teach Deva Nagiri alphabet if he took up Sanskrit as his second language, without knowledge of which one could not become a thorough master of Hindi'. For these reasons, we humbly think the Deva Nagiri alphabet should be introduced in the primary and middle schools. The Deva Nagiri alphabet if introduced will not supplant the Gurmukhi, for it has no place in the schools now. .... We have already seen that Mohammedan religious books are written in Panjabi for the masses. Thus it asserted that '....Hindi and not Urdu is the lingua franca of India as stated before.' Quoting someone Dr. Rajendra Mitra who is said to have stated as;

'Hindi is by far the most important of all vernacular dialects of India... is the language of the most civilised portion of the Hindu race...'

For the advocates of Hindi, the facts of India's linguistic diversity was neither an issue nor a matter of fact or verification. the memorandum asserted that even '...Bengali is a form of Hindi, but so highly polished as to be called a distinct tongue...' and that 'it is extremely



desirable that India should have a language understood in every part of it, and this is another reason why Hindi should be encouraged by being made the medium of popular instruction in the Punjab...' [532-36]

Then came a petition from inhabitants of Multan [p.537], seeking again upturn of Urdu by Hindi, here reasons are enumerated about the defects of Urdu as a language with observations that it is not the mother tongue of Punjabis. Hence school education should be in the local *bhasha*, but that *bhasha* although called Panjabi is surely Hindi.... [p.537]

Similarly, a memorandum from residents of Rupar [p540-44] made a case for Hindi language as the medium of instruction. Arguing that Deva Nagiri characters are the best and 'most scientific characters that the world has ever produced' and none of the objections that apply to the Persian characters hold good with respect to the Deva Nagiri characters.... The petition also provides a table for Indian languages wherein Hindi is shown to be spoken by 70 million as against other languages total of 74 million. Rather cunningly or cleverly without further discussion, the tables show Garwali, Kumauni, Nepali and Panjabi as part of Hindi quoting in support remarks of an English teacher, 'as considered by Mr. Beames to be a dialect of Hindi'... [541]. Then follows an elaborate table of Punjab population divided into Hindu and Mohammedans for every district. Here again, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains are lumped together under Hindus, accordingly 15 districts are seen to have majority of Hindus while 17 have Mohammedans. It goes on to argue that main reason for lack of progress of education in Punjab is due to inappropriate medium of instruction which is Urdu. That is chief reason why even Muslims have made no progress on literacy. Providing data from last census it says only 95,816 persons [males] can read and write from Mohammedan population of 5,639,845. While among Hindus this is 325,069 out of total 3,883,915, while only 35,976 Sikhs can do so among their pop of 6, 39,430.

The memorandum then provides its recommendations for language teaching in primary, middle and high schools. For primary, a two-tiered system of instruction is suggested with Hindi and Panjabi medium schools. In the Hindi medium region, or in the Punjab proper, it suggests that in Hindi-medium schools, boys should begin their educational course in the primary schools with the Panjabi language taught through Deva Nagiri characters; and after a year or so, Hindi should be substituted for the Panjabi. In some schools, it might be found necessary for some sects who hold the Gurmukhi characters in special reverence, to allow them to read Panjabi through Gurmukhi characters along with Hindi through Deva Nagiri.... For the Middle and High schools, of course, there is no mention of Panjabi at all, while attention is

devoted to Urdu and Hindi as medium of instruction. With tables and such arguments the petitioners seems to have reached the limit and ask;

...Is anything more required to prove that education among masses will not spread until the Deva Nagiri script and the real vernaculars of the country are adopted as media of instruction?...[p.545]

This petition was signed by Lakshman Singh and 210 others from Rawalpindy. Interestingly 43 clerks of Punjab Northern State Railway and residents of Lalamusa of Gujarat district sought to replace Urdu by Hindi, telling how after years of learning, they still have to struggle hard in learning 'this alien language'. From Shahpur district, Lala Bhawani Das and 2000 others wrote for Hindi. Kangra residents led by Ganesh and Sanu with 200 others asked for Hindi. It rebutted Sikhs' claim for Panjabi as;

'Sikhs may advocate the adoption of Gurmukhi but even their sacred book [the granth] is written in pure Hindi, the characters alone being different...'

From Hoshiarpur district, an advocate for Hindi was Purna Chand. From Hissar, Lala Ugra Sen with 4444 others sent a petition favouring Hindi. Lala Kishan Gopal led some 1000 other signatures from Gujranwala district arguing for the use of Hindi. Lala Thakur Das from Dera Ismail Khan with 1550 others argued the case of Hindi with a long statement. One of the novel points made here was that Persian alphabet was altogether unsuited to printing in this age of the printing press and universal education, 'one such disadvantage alone should be enough to see the doom of any alphabet...' A petition from Sialkot district was led by Pandit Hira Nand with 800 others again advocating the use of Hindi. While Gujarat Bhasha Pracharini Sabha led by Narayan Dass with 5506 others, advocated not only Hindi, but also emphasised Sanskrit. Ralla Ram with 92 others wrote from Rupar for Hindi, Gopal Chand from Lahore advocated Hindi and Commission noted identical petitions from 75 Kaithal residents and another petition from 1000 residents of Gujranwala all advocating the use of Hindi. Pandit Dayarama Varma supported by 4252 others sought to argue for Hindi and the Commission noted identical signed petitions from 400 residents of Khangah, 552 from Shujabad, 75 from Montgomery, 35 from Multan. Delhi Literary Society sent detailed memorandum on all 70 odd questions, but its answer to vernacular was short.

Then there were a number of individuals who testified for the use of Hindi. Pandit Bhagwan Das of Lahore made a passionate plea for Hindi. Then Lala Mul Raj advocated Hindi who as a

teacher of several years advocated forcefully for the introduction of Hindi in schools.

Sardar Dyal Singh, an influential aristocrat who traced his family origins to Ranjit Singh's sirdars and president of the Indian Association, Lahore was another witness to the Commission. As an educated man, his evidence consisted of brief sentences of succinct prose, he first summarised arguments of those favouring Urdu, followed by a far longer list in favour of Hindi. That Panjabi did not get even a mention from this aristocrat of supposedly Sikh connections was a befitting indictment of the kind of Sirdars nurtured at the Sikh court. But Dyal Singh's influence must have been considerable as the Commission while summing up arguments on the language question enlisted Dyal Singh's style of presentation as models of rational explanation and acknowledged his help while finding a way out of this hornet's dilemma.

Dyal Singh's submission consisted of summaries of other peoples' views. First he summed up arguments in favour of Urdu in a neat numerical order as;

1. That it is the lingua franca of India.
2. That it is susceptible of more vigorous growth.
3. That it is, and has been, the vernacular for such a long time
4. That it, at least, is the language of the Mohammedans, who form more than half the population of the Punjab
5. That it having been recognised so long, it would be inconvenient to abolish its use.
6. That it is the language of the newspapers
7. That it can be written easily and speedily.

Then he went on to enumerate arguments against Urdu again in precise points, but his strictures were far more numerous; According to Dyal Singh arguments against Urdu were;

1. That it is not the vernacular of the people
2. That it is known only by the comparatively few people who study it.
3. That the great majority of the people, to be able to understand it, must learn it.
4. That even those who know it seldom converse in it among themselves.
5. That among those well conversed in Persian and Arabic and Urdu, it is not used in friendly or domestic circles, and that even such persons cannot talk in it correctly for any length of time.
6. That it is not the language of our passions or feelings.
7. That even the Mohammedans themselves never use it, except in exceptional circumstances.
8. That the majority of the Mohammedans of the Punjab being descendants from Hindu converts, having retained most of the usages, manners and customs of their Hindu forefathers, speak the same language as that used by the Hindus.

9. That the Urdu borrows largely from foreign languages, while the Hindi has recourse to indigenous sources for improving itself.
10. That Persian characters are defective, and do not represent all the sounds in use amongst us.

It is noteworthy that Dyal Singh failed to mention even once the fate or role of the Panjabi language? As highly educated and influential man of Lahore, he was obviously playing on a larger canvas of Hindu revivalism and 'national' consciousness being considered and adopted by many leading Hindus of the Punjab at that time [p.194-5].

### **[b] The Urdu Lobby**

The Urdu lobbyists also consisted of several organisations and individuals. Among influential groups, the Anjuman-I-Punjab was a body of educated persons all attached to the Punjab University College. However, on the language issue, they were also split along the religious divide. The Sikhs among them advocated Panjabi language, the Hindus advanced the cause of Hindi and while Muslims sought the continuation of Urdu. Among its members, Gurmukh Singh presented a statement for Panjabi, Syed M. Hussain and Syad Amir Shah advocated Urdu, while Amar Nath and Ishar Pershad launched many arguments for the introduction of Hindi.

Dr Rahim Khan stated that although Urdu is not the dialect of the country, still it is not on that account detrimental to the number of pupils; 'no complaints against Urdu have ever been heard from the public at large. ...In any part of the Punjab proper, no one understands Hindi except a few Brahmans. If instruction in primary schools were given in Panjabi, which certainly would be a great improvement and Urdu might be reasonably discarded'. But the Panjabi dialect is not so rich that books on advanced subjects can be translated into it without the aid of Persian and Arabic -vide the Director's annual report.

This was followed by a long memorandum [p.576-81] from Residents of Lahore in favour of Urdu, represented by Prabu Dyal, Nandra Singh and Mumtaz Ali with 3906 others advocated Urdu emphasising that they were representative of Christians, Muslims and Hindus. They argued against the lobby of Lahore's Bengalis 'who have gathered many Hindu young men in Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj and who had undertaken a crusade against Urdu through *The Tribune* and a petty paper called '*Reformer*'. The memorandum asserted that for these Hindus, the issue has become a religious war and the two papers have sown 'a great deal of mischief

among inhabitants of the province'. Pointing that such mischief makers are some Bengalis who find it

`natural in depreciating the Urdu language and the Persian character, as thee cannot be learned so easily by them as the Hindi language and the Deva-Nagiri character and they are therefore, practically excluded from holding any important post in this province, where a knowledge of Urdu is imperative. These Bengalis, by appealing to the religious and national feelings of some young Hindus and by pointing out that Urdu and its present character are relics of those conquerors who were, in their estimation, oppressors for centuries, have been successful in gathering a party of young men around them who are chiefly the members of the local Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samajis, and do not in any sense represent the Hindu community. *The Tribune* and a petty little paper called the *Reformer*, the sole advocates of this agitation, are both conducted by Bengalis. [p. 570]

More arguments came against Hindi advocates via petitions from residents of Multan headed by Rahim Shah, president of the Urdu Society. It made many pleas on behalf of Urdu language. Another petition from Anjuman-i-Islamiya of Wazirabad and Muslims and 'most of the Hindu residents' of that place was received in support of retaining Urdu as the language of instruction. They quoted testimonies of several English men as supporting their arguments. Thus, Lord Lawrence's early reference to Urdu as 'use of this tongue is rapidly spreading among all ranks, Urdu is becoming more than a lingua franca...' was cited in the petition. Similarly they quoted Sir Aitchison's reply to the Sikh National Association on 29 April 1882 at Lahore saying, 'I trust you will not think I undervalue Panjabi as the vehicle of daily instruction..... but there is only one newspaper in Panjabi, one in Hindi, one in Persian and 30 in Urdu...[p.579].'<sup>5</sup>

Karnal district also sent a petition for Urdu, another one arrived from Gurdaspur by Anjuman Himayal led by Sayyid Barkat Ali Shah with 200 others. Similarly Anjuman-i-Akhwan-us-safa from Gujarat led by Abdul Kasim advocated Urdu. Gujranwala district was led by Raza Ali favouring Urdu. From Daska, Sialkot, Daulat Ram was joined by Ahmad Ulla with 30 others who wrote in support of Urdu language. Their argument said,

'When any Panjabi youth wishes to express excited feelings and dignified thoughts, he invokes Urdu for the loan of appropriate expressions.'

From Amritsar, Zahur Shah wrote for Urdu, while from Hazara, Anjuman of Hazara led by Rajah Jahanand Khan Bahadur, Najaf Ali, Jalal-ud-din, and 21 others advocated the continuation of Urdu. Majlis-I-Islamia, Lahore was represented by a fellow and argued for Urdu. Maulvi Fazal-ul-Hasan, Head Master of Oriental College, Lahore was also called. Sardar Kanwar Bikarma Singh Bahadur Ahluwalia also attested that Urdu was not a dialect of the masses, but on that account it was not unnecessarily unpopular or not useful.

### **[c] The Panjabi Lobby**

Panjabi lobby was the smallest in terms of organisations and individuals who presented arguments and memoranda to the Commission. Among major organisations, the Singh Sabha of Lahore [also known as Sikh National Association] presented a memorandum to the Commission on 1 August 1882. It argued on several ways for Punjab and making clear the distinction between Hindi and Urdu on one hand Hindi and Panjabi on the other. With the introduction of Urdu it said, the Sikhs, so to speak, are losing their strength [for it is a fact that a Sikh of the fine old type can with difficulty be found], no because they are now no more engaged in wars and battles, but because most of them, being ignorant and illiterate, contract habits of drinking and other vices [p.564]. They also supported Urdu-advocates of Lahore in seeing that the Hindi lobby was mainly fermented by Bengalis in Lahore.

Now it is very well known, even to those persons who have made such application that Hindi is not the language of the people. Hindi or Urdu is spoken in localities surrounding Delhi or in the North Western Provinces. Hindi and Urdu are one, so far as concerns their grammatical forms; but they differ in this; that Urdu has got more of Arabic or Persian words and is written in the Persian characters; whereas Hindi has got more of Sanskrit words and is written in Deva-Nagiri characters. But the language of this country is different from them both, both grammatically and in the vocabulary of words. It is the language in which Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, Turki, and [now] English words are found, therefore Panjabi is a composite language. [p.565]

In practical terms, the advantage of Panjabi was that it is the easiest to learn.

‘Panjabi characters are the simplest of all other characters to require fewer strokes than Deva-Nagiri’. [p.566]

The Sabha also presented a somewhat novel offer to Lord Hunter regarding his visit to Lahore.

On behalf of the Sabha, it offered a Hunter prize to the Senate of Punjab University College -to be awarded to the successful female candidate that has passed for the first time the Panjabi examination at *Budhiwan* grade. This petition was signed by Baba Khem Singh Bedi, Man Singh and Mian Singh and Gurmukh Singh. Sri Guru Singh Sabha [p563-6] submitted a similar petition dated 8 July 1882, on the part of 'the Sikh nation', arguing in length about the need for Panjabi teaching. Then *lambardar* of Ludhiana district sent a brief memorandum [vernacular] regarding Panjabi teaching in schools. A similar petition was received from 66 residents of Gurdaspur seeking Panjabi as vernacular language of government schools.

Then follows a brief two paragraph memorial [translated from vernacular] signed by 1005 inhabitants of Gujarat distinct in favour of Panjabi language in Gurmukhi in primary schools and Deva Nagiri in the Middle schools for the Sikh community in the Punjab. This memorial is followed then by another from Sat Sabha, Lahore, asking Panjabi to be made the medium of instruction.

There were a few individuals who testified before the Commission on behalf of Panjabi language. The first was, Baba Khem Singh Bedi -a descendant of Guru Nanak's family, who put up a very able defence for the Panjabi language. As he was called as a witness, Bedi answered many questions of members with wit and precision and citing several humorous phrases from chaste Panjabi. He told the Commission members that the condition of Punjabis is best summed up by the phrase; *parhe Farsi veche tel, ih dekho karmon ke khel*. He argued forcefully that the mother tongue should be the first language taught to children of the province which was acknowledged by all to be Panjabi.

Sahib Singh Rai Bahadur of Delhi also observed that vernacular taught was not of the people and recommended that Gurmukhi and Hindi should be established, but failed how this can ever be done as long as Urdu remains the language of the court. Sardar Gurdial Singh, an assistant commissioner, Hoshiarpur advocated Panjabi seeking it as a compulsory in elementary schools. This gentleman's arguments put Haji Ghulam Hasan, a member of the Commission in a buoyant mood to cross-examine him further. Almost irked, Hasan raised several queries rather revealingly;

Q. What do you mean by Panjabi?

A. I mean the language in the country. There are many dialects, but it is one language, which is understood everywhere, except where the language is Pushtu. That language is not Urdu; that is the language spoken in Lucknow and Delhi.

Q. What is the literature of 'Panjabi'?

A. It has a large number of books in Gurmukhi character and in almost all subjects.

Q. Can you name a few in that language?

A. I can provide a list if you wish so....

Q. Can't you remember a few titles?

A. I can send a list of titles if the Commission wishes.....

Sirdar Atar Singh C.I.E., Chief of Bhadour wrote in anger, protesting against Hindu organisations, in particular the Arya Samaj's advocacy of Hindi and their main assertion that Panjabi is not a language but a dialect of Hindi. Starting his argument, Atar Singh says that he has heard 'with greatest grief' from some quarters that Panjabi is not a language... He was dismayed by them as:

'Few self-conceited persons, having got some prejudice with their mother-tongue [Panjabi] and its simple characters, desired to introduce Hindi and Deva Nagiri in the Punjab. In order to do this, they got up a memorial signed by about two thousand men consisting of shopkeepers, Babus, & co., and sent it to the Education Commission.... But you know that the language proposed by them is nowhere spoken or even understood by a majority of persons in the province; for the language spoken is Panjabi, and the people that speak it are [in the British territory] about three times greater than those who use dialects. Such as Urdu, Multani, & co.... It is indeed strange that while Hindi is nowhere spoken by any number of people [except few among the population] the originators of the memorial deem it their duty to put extra weight [for Urdu is already one] on the heads of the poor simple people who are inclined to learn their mother tongue more than other vernaculars.... It is undoubtedly true that people learn Urdu, not for they like it, but for they cannot see other source to get employment....

Moreover, Atar Singh was also incensed by allegation that Panjabi had no literature. He wrote,

'it is evident that Panjabi is not destitute of literature or science, and if any man may want to satisfy himself of this, he may inspect my Bhaodour house library, where he can find that no less than fifteen hundred of Panjabi books are lined up there. Even the fine art [music] is not wanting, for there are many books on musical science in Panjabi....



Saying that and as you might be aware, I am a stern advocate of Sanskrit, but argued that;

‘Thus you see Panjabi is the easiest, cheapest and surest mode of imparting elementary instruction to all sorts of people. ... I have no prejudice for Hindi or Urdu but instead of that I want them a man may learn his mother tongue as well as other languages....’

#### **[d] Testimony of English Witnesses**

The opinion of English administrators, missionaries and others concerned with educational reforms form an interesting set of evidence. For them, in general, the language issue was not emotional one. In a sense, they were more objective in its assessment of language issue.

B. H. Baden-Powell, C.S. Commissioner of the Lahore Division, ‘this raises the difficult question, As far as their oral teaching, object lessons & c. Go, the language used would necessarily be the local varieties of Panjabi, which are everywhere used, and which vary from district to district. The chief point is the character to be used for writing and reading and the language of their reading books. This is rather ‘a burning’ question. Some say Urdu is the most generally useful; and there is no doubt that if we wish only to turn our class of *patwaris* and *lambardars* and other embryo servants this would be true. ...ultimately, I believe, nature will settle this, and that the various dialects must fuse into one. ... As regards the controversy Hindi-versus Urdu, the proposal to adopt the one language to the practical exclusion of the other.... with them it is a national and a religious question. The Sikh and Hindu think that their nationality and faith are undermined by Urdu which they regard as the badge of Mohammedanism. On such grounds, the discussion would be endless. ... All in my opinion, there should be no compulsion ...allow each village to employ Hindi, or Gurmukhi or Urdu readers according to circumstances.

Dr. G. W. Leitner LL.D. sent the longest memo to the Commission besides appearing as an expert witness to answer Commission members’ queries [p.352-]. His remarks on the language are incisive and very insightful. In particular he exposed Hindus’ advocacy of Hindi and arguments for the use of ‘Devnagiri alphabet for Gurmukhi, as nothing more than a mere subterfuge for introducing Hindi’. Moreover, he went on record to say,

‘As a rule where Hindus in the Punjab ask for Hindi, they mean Sanskrit’..... At

present, the advocates alike of Urdu, Hindi and Panjabi speak on behalf of a people which have itself been fully consulted. ...the leaders of the 'Hindi movement; pursuer objects of the national unification of Hindus throughout India, to which the introduction of the Nagiri character is to be a step....

He thought employment of *pundits* to teach Sanskrit and Hindi to Hindus, and of *bhais* to teach Gurmukhi to Sikhs and of *maulvis* to teach Arabic to Mohammedans would be a satisfactory way of resolving this vexed issue. W. R. M. Holroyd appeared before the Commission as director of Public Instruction and he was asked to provide a detailed report on the progress and affairs of Punjab education. This formed the basis of Commission's recommendations. He provided data and financial statements for each sector, primary, high and college education, comparing the number of students for each sector. He also provided data to compare educational province of Punjab and Bengal provinces as below:

#### Comparison of Education Attainment in Punjab and Bengal

	M.A.	B.A.	Under-graduates
Punjab	9	43	893
Bengal	419	1560	25,227

Later he was called again to rebut Dr. Leitner's charges which were largely directed at his submission. J. Sime, Principal of Government College, Lahore had his say on the language issue as Rev. F. H. Baring of Batala and Rev. K. C. Chatterjee also gave evidence.

Miss M. Rose Greenfield provided substantial evidence on 2 June 1882 when laid down some cogent arguments for the teaching of Panjabi language. Taking example of Ludhiana villages of which she had considerable experience of schooling, she argued that much time is wasted by teachers' instruction in Urdu -a language which is un-familiar to children in primary schools. ...moreover;

'It must not be supposed that Panjabi is spoken in the villages only, that only Urdu is spoken and understood in the towns. Far from this being the case, all the lower classes, and the women of the higher, even including such foreigners as Kashmiris and Kabulis, use Panjabi as the medium of interchange of thought. Even the Government servants who talk high-flown Urdu in court often leave it

at their door of their own homes and resume the familiar colloquial'. [p.227]

She also recited evidence from her own experience that 'neither of the languages taught in the government female schools in this district is the dialect of the people'. Both Urdu and Hindi are to them foreign tongues, though the latter has more affinity to Gurmukhi than the former. Citing reaction of the people in villages, they ask, 'are our daughters to become *munshis* and do *naukri*, that they should learn Urdu?'

She concluded by saying that:

I strongly advocate therefore that in all village schools at least Gurmukhi should be taught first, on order to open the minds of the children, adding in the higher classes Urdu for Mohammedans and Hindi for the Hindus, and feel sure that pupils so taught will be more intelligent and make for more rapid progress than those instructed on any other plan...

Miss Greenfield was also concerned about another aspect of school education in Punjab. She was worried by the message conveyed by the government books issued for Hindu girls; not only its print quality was poor, these contained many objectionable materials. Citing such passages, she highlighted how a particular passage tells Hindu girls; 'do not disobey their husbands', and instructs them 'to serve them.' Another passage tells Hindu girls, 'drinking the water of one's husband's feet has the same merit as pilgrimage and bathing...' was thought to be invitation to 'female serfdom' by Miss Greenfield –perhaps a case of misunderstanding the Hindu tradition by a Christian mind.

### **Commission's Recommendations**

On the vital question of vernacular to be used in schools, the Commission's recommendation was cautionary. It asked the 'status quo' to be continued as far as language teaching was concerned. The Commission almost dodged the question by reproducing Sirdar Dyal Singh's testimony as a summary of arguments of both sides saying it as a fair representation of all the memorials the Commission has received. It observed;

Unfortunately the prejudices of both the parties have turned this language question into a religious one, and the most prominent subject of the day [p.108]...

'These memorials show a wide gulf between the ideas of these parties of opinion but when the President visited Lahore, during which trip I accompanied him, and we heard personally all the parties, the difference did not seem to be so great as it seemed in the memorials.'

Noting that there were more memorials for Hindi than Urdu, Dyal Singh underlined his argument as;

It is also my duty to state that if Urdu should remain the Court Language of the Punjab it would prove injurious to the Hindu community to study Hindi or Gurmukhi; but be as it may, we should encourage the study of Hind and Gurmukhi.

Then the Commission cited an extract where Dyal Singh had cited the report of the Indian Association of Lahore in favour of Hindi, 'as unquestionably true one.' The opinion of the Indian Association, it quoted read as;

It will be obvious from the above that what we have recommended regarding the adoption of Hindi as the fittest language for the primary schools depends upon its being also adopted as the Court language by the Government. If the Language is Urdu, primary education must perforce be imparted in Urdu.

However, the Commission left the question alone saying,

In such a state of affair, nothing can be done but what I have cited above. I don't think it is the duty of the Commission to decide what should be the Court

language of a province; it is to be decided by the local Government; therefore, I don't think it is necessary to give any opinion as to what language and characters would be most suitable. [p.107]

In practical terms, this meant Urdu was to continue as the medium of instruction with some 'vague recognition' of Panjabi and Hindi in particular regions of the province. While the Commission made a number of proposals in other aspects of education in the province, its conclusion regarding language issue was that it was 'fraught with worrying aspects of 'Hindu and Sikh and Muslim nationalism!'

## **Conclusion**

With the introduction of formal schooling by the colonial administration in the Punjab, the medium of instruction issue arose as a new question and it immediately acquired the status of a major socio-linguistic controversy leading to much heated debate. Until then, most Punjabis, by and large, had shared Panjabi as a common medium of oral exchange among themselves. As the issue was forced by the colonial initiative to reform traditional education, the new cultural menu offered particular social groups, who had differentiating characteristics in terms of religious affiliation, to start claiming another distinction of group identity. The new factor was specific language as a marker of group identity and affiliation. In this sense, Anderson's hypothesis regarding linguistic identity and nascent form of nationalism finds ample endorsement from the colonial Punjab.

Conventional wisdom in Indian historiography has generally blamed the 'communal divide' to the role of the colonial state. It is alleged that the colonial state deliberately fermented ethnic division among the ruled, be it religion or the language and indeed other instruments it had at its disposal. As far as the linguistic affiliation in Punjab, this hypothesis finds little support; all one can confidently state is that the origins of language controversy lay in the education reforms undertaken by the government of India –as part of state's modernisation endeavours. The role of the state, in this case was neither deliberate nor manipulative, if anything, the state authorities were at pains to steer clear of controversial implications arising due to introduction of formal education even when it was clear that facts were being distorted by partisan advocates.

Thus a people who were hitherto defined separately only by their religious heritage, became further differentiated by another factor; the language and its associated script. For Hindus, the

Hindi language, for Muslims, Urdu language acquired symbols of ethnic identity, meanwhile the status of Punjabi crumbled by this modernisation process. One could say, in a sense, Panjabi was almost made destitute to be supported rather half-heartedly by the Sikhs. With a particular language becoming a medium of education, Urdu in the Punjab case, other groups felt the force of discrimination and started making demands to be given equal status in the form of public space generated by colonial educational policies especially in terms of jobs. Thus new organisations which had only years earlier had sprung up to defend their faith from missionary propaganda now turned upon each other to petition for a specific language.

The irony and a historic tragedy as it proved to be later in 1947, was that two largest communities of Punjab, Muslims and Hindus found fit to canvass against a shared language, Panjabi, thus putting onus on the Sikh elite to propagate what should have been a common endeavour. As a crucial cultural bond of common language was gradually broken up, this led eventually to far more narrow self-definitions of Punjabis with a new barrier of language affiliation.

The paradox was that such canvassing was not based upon social reality. Many advocates of Hindi and Urdu knew they were making a very contentious, almost a false claim; and in this they found no contradiction while twisting data, logic and statements to substantiate their respective petitions. What seemed to inspire them was a keen sense of consolidation with their own group as against the 'other.' The evidence before the Commission also suggests that it was the Hindu elite who were most aggressive champions of Hindi language –they organised petitions on a massive scale; with much disparaging and unwarranted observations on Panjabi as also on Urdu language. The kind of arguments used by many Hindu organisations to demolish or dismiss claims of Urdu and Panjabi surely sowed the seeds of communal discord which became a factor of tragic consequences as the colonial rule ended with the partition of Punjab in 1947. The shadow of 1880s continued to lurk even further in the postcolonial Indian Punjab. As the demand for a Panjabi speaking state was put forward by Shiromani Akali Dal in the 1950s echoes of such old arguments were resurrected.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Anderson, B. 1983 *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.

<sup>2</sup> Banga, Indu. 1978. *Agrarian system of the Sikhs*. Delhi: Manohar.

<sup>3</sup> Mehta, H. R. 1929. *A history of the growth and development of Western education in Punjab: 1846-1887*. Lahore. Leitner G. W. 1885. *History of indigenous education in the Punjab since annexation and in 1882*. Lahore.

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<sup>4</sup> *Report of the Punjab Provincial Committee with evidence taken before the committee and memorials addressed to the Education Committee*, Calcutta: Printed by the Superintendent of Government of India, 1884, 602pp. [London, BL V/26/860/12].

<sup>5</sup> In 1901, total number of publications in the Punjab was 1478 of which 425 books were mainly of poetry and there were 409 religious treatises. The linguistic division of media is indicated below;

Punjab Newspapers 1903: Language-wise Breakdown

English	31
English -Urdu	1
Urdu	164
Hindi	6
Gurmukhi	7
Total no. of Newspapers	209

Source: Imperial Gazette of India, Provincial News Punjab, vol. 1, 1908, 455p.